A Single Decision (Take Two)

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Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]
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Chapter 29

"Soldiers of the Confederacy, the hour has come!" Admiral Hithlu's voice boomed on every loudspeaker of every ship in the Kashyyyk system. "You have fought against every odd, overcoming every adversary, to arrive here, the moment of victory! Your enemy is before you, they are withering under your assault, their spirits are breaking. This is the final push. Crush them! Shatter them! Let them rue the day they began this war!"

Kronaak knew the truth wasn't quite so glamorous. The battle had been won the moment the Republic committed to it. Grievous's meticulous destruction of their supply hubs and convoys in the preceding weeks had left the Loyalists far weaker than they appeared, as they were now discovering. Everything had gone as he said it would. Without supply, no military could function.

While his background of growing up a slave precluded a historic education, Kronaak had done his reading in the days since he'd become literate. Ancient starships had run on fusion reactors, capable of running for centuries without interruption. Many places in the galaxy still used this simple technology, for its durability and reliability. The trade-off, though, was that starships powered by fusion were only capable of glacially slow movements through space. To get from Kashyyyk to the icy gas giant of Kuhurrik would take such a ship many months at sublight speeds.

A modern starship powered by a hypermatter annihilation reactor could make that journey in a few hours, pushing hundreds of times a standard gravity's worth of force from its engines, thousands for a dedicated warship. Inertial dampers would keep anything organic inside the ship from being splattered into paste. The problem was that hypermatter reactors burned through their hypermatter fuel in just a few days when being constantly pushed to their absolute limits. Most starships had a slower sublight cruising accelerations to stretch the fuel reserves over several weeks. Big freighters like the *Lucrehulks* were designed to go for months without refueling, provided no one ran the engines at full power in that time. Kronaak supposed the galaxy was very lucky hyperdrives ran on their own power supply by design. But how exactly a hyperdrive worked, no one knew but the ancients. The devices didn't like gravity wells, that was for sure. In-system jumps were dangerous, it took an expert navigator to chart one. *Like Khwaramenes,* thought Kronaak.

"Sir," OOM-27 announced, "twelve Star Destroyers have shut down their main reactors. Thirteen, fourteen... fifteen, sir."

"So it begins," said Kronaak. "They're not shutting them down, they're dying from fuel exhaustion. Move the fleet forward, we're going into close quarters!"

Every Separatist fleet in the system was moving in for the kill, as the Republic-red dots on their tactical displays faded one by one. *Is it wrong to win by such subterfuge?* Kronaak asked himself. *No, it would have been idiocy not to exploit this weakness.*

At this range, the massive turbolasers on the Separatist frigates and destroyers could be focused with devastating effects. Vulture droids, Tri-fighters, and Hyena bombers were able to refuel and rearm in minutes, before immediately entering the fray again. Like a swarm of vicious insects, the Confederate fleets descended on the faltering Republic formations. Shields failed, armor plates melted, droplets of liquefied durasteel flew into the void, superstructures disintegrated in a conflagration of fuel and oxygen, reactors overloaded and created miniature supernovae where they didn't simply die. Kronaak watched it all from *Aethra*'s bridge, as battle turned to slaughter. *Come on,* thought Kronaak, *surrender now! Spare your soldiers a useless death! Your fates are sealed!*

At last, the Republic leader's hologram appeared on a system-wide open transmission. "This is Governor Therbon of the 12th Fleet. I am announced the immediate and unconditional surrender of all Republic forces in the system," the man said, looking haggard and exhausted.

"Cease fire," Kronaak ordered his droids. All across the system, the Confederates followed suit, and the battle went still.

"Governor Therbon," Hithlu's response came. "Your plea for mercy has been heard." The Umbaran wore an icy smile, that of a predator's, and he held out an open hand. "I will show you the same mercy you showed our senator, who had always been loyal to your Republic. I will show you the same mercy you showed my people on the battlefield, as they defended their lands, homes, and families against your unprovoked invasion. Yes, I will show you that same mercy!" Hithlu's face twisted into a primal sneer of hatred, and he closed his fist. "NO PRISONERS!" he screamed.

The transmission cut out, and a moment of silence fell across the system, as neither side was sure what to do next. Hithlu's own fleet, mostly Umbaran crews and ships, opened fire once again, while the collapsing Republic fleet hastily tried to muster what defense it could.

Within seconds, every other Confederate flag officer opened a hologram channel to each other, convening an impromptu council. "Is he in charge here?" asked Helnurath the Stenax. "I'm not opposed to killing them all, but this didn't come from Grievous."

"Hithlu has authority to give that order, and we are obligated to follow," said Ricimer Eemon. "But this won't be something we can cover up."

"Affirmative," Khan the super tactical droid said. "Whatever happens here, everyone will soon know."

"I can't believe what I'm hearing!" Khwaramenes the Givin said, indignation in his voice. "Is this what we really are? Murderers and butchers, covering up our crimes like politicians? We cannot obey Hithlu! We cannot!"

The four turned to Kronaak, who tapped a claw on his walking stick. He had no great love for the Republic, or Humans as a species, clone or not. But he was a professional, an admiral of the Confederacy who had risen from chattel-pens of Siskeen. And professionals never let grudges get in the way of work. "We cannot follow that order," Kronaak said. "Keep your batteries silent, rescue what prisoners you can."

"What if they shoot at us?" asked Helnurath.

"Who, the Umbarans or the Republic?" Eemon asked in turn.

"Any force should be met with force," said Khan.

"If Hithlu wants to commit treason, let him," Khwaramenes said. "His fate is his own."

"I have a passenger aboard who can convince the Republic to trust us," said Kronaak. The council adjourned and set to their tasks, while Kronaak called up Admiral Wurtz from the temporary brig of a hangar.

"What's going on?" Wurtz asked, looking around the bridge of *Aethra*, escorted by two security droids.

"My commanding officer has decided to commit a war crime," Kronaak said, gesturing to the tactical display. "My comrades and I have declined to participate. We need your help to convince Therbon we will accept his surrender, and not murder him like Hithlu is trying to do."

"Well," Wurtz said, eyes going wide. "I can see the battle hasn't turned in the last few days."

"It has not," agreed Kronaak. "You can save the lives of thousands here and now, though they will become prisoners of war, or you can let them die. The choice is yours."

Wurtz sighed. "Put me on," he said.

A Confederate broadcast with Republic identification surely put some poor communications officer for a spin on Therbon's ship, but the transmission went through. "Wurtz?" Therbon asked, as he appeared on the view screen. Therbon and the rest of his bridge crew in the background were jolted to a side, and the transmission flickered. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm a prisoner of war, Governor," he said. "The other Separatists aren't following this Admiral Hithlu's commands, they'll accept your surrender." Wurtz nodded at Kronaak beside him. "I can vouch for Kronaak, at the very least. My crew and I have been treated in accordance with all Republic laws of war."

Therbon grimaced. "Very well," he said. "I'll direct what's left of my fleet to stop firing at the Seps not in the Umbaran flotilla."

"I cannot guarantee protection for all of you," Kronaak said, "only those we can reach."

"Most of my ships have no power," Therbon said. "We're sitting ducks out here!"

"You cannot expect me to attack my own side, Governor."

"No, I cannot." Therbon closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. "Do what you can, Admiral. Our lives are in your hands."

"Claws," Kronaak corrected, snapping his once. "Kronaak out."

"What do you mean, *complicated*?" Grievous growled at the hologram of Kronaak.

"Hithlu gave an illegal order, under the laws of war," Kronaak said, calm as ever. "The rest of the flag officers and I have elected not to follow it. We are attempting to prevent Hithlu and the Umbarans from carrying out this order."

"Whose laws of war?" asked Grievous.

"The Republic's."

"The *Republic's?* Which side do you think you're on!?"

"The right side, sir," Kronaak said. "We are the Republic's successor state, it stands to follow we have inherited such expectations."

"Bah!" Grievous waved his hand. *Where was that law when they stood by and let my people be massacred?* he wondered. "I thought I was finished with this kind of in-fighting among my subordinates!"

"Apparently not, sir." The cool crustacean wasn't budging a centimeter on this issue. For Grievous, he couldn't care less about who died on the battlefield. There were no prisoners on Kalee, he didn't see why that would be a problem out in the rest of the galaxy.

"Carry on," Grievous said, before shutting off the transmission. He took a moment to pace about in his shuttle headquarters, waiting for the next problem to rear its head. Thirty seven seconds later, another transmission came in, but not one from anywhere in the sector. "Captain Hatha, why are you contacting me?"

"General!" Blox Hatha's hologram gave a sharp salute. The hefty Nemoidian half-cyborg looked as energetic as ever. "I thought you would appreciate a direct report on what I've accomplished today."

"Yes?" Grievous asked, eyes narrowed in weariness.

"One of my contacts on Coruscant got me some juicy information. A relief convoy was gathering at Umbara, to retake Torn Station and resupply Therbon's fleet in the Kashyyyk system!" Hatha grinned, and wrung his one organic hand and one mechanical hand together. "They weren't expecting me, it seemed!"

"So, you destroyed a supply convoy?"

"More than that!" Hatha said, now beaming. "I've disabled a good portion of the orbital blockade, since they'd moved fuel from the warships to the tankers! The planet's ripe for liberation!"

"Now *that* is worthy of a personal report," Grievous said. "Well done, Captain. See to it no more supplies reach Umbara, I will dispatch a fleet as soon as possible." With that finished, Grievous summoned his doctor and the magnaguards. "Prepare to return to orbit, we are done here," he ordered to the droid pilot of the shuttle.

Back aboard *Encounter*, Esera was disappointed but not surprised to find that once again, someone in the Confederacy had decided to pull another stupid, short-sighted, criminal act that would only harm his own cause in the end. "You've got to be kidding me," she groaned, watching the tactical computer's replay of how the battle had ended.

"That's exactly what happened, Captain," Voyan said. "If it makes you feel better, I wouldn't have shot at them even if Kronaak and the others had decided to follow Hithlu."

"Very reassuring, lieutenant."

"Are there any prisoners aboard?" asked Murshida.

"No." Voyan brought up the security displays of the hangars and brig. "All empty. I kept *Encounter* towards the back of the formation, where a lone destroyer wouldn't be so vulnerable."

"I'll have Grievous's head for this, if he's behind it," Esera muttered. *Why do these things keep happening?* Wherever she went, Esera had to clean up a mess, it seemed.

"That would be a tough fight, Captain," Murshida said.

"I hope this was Hithlu's doing," said Esera. "I don't even know the man but he seems slimy."

"Hithlu is an Umbaran, slimy is his culture," Voyan said, shrugging. "Wanton slaughter isn't. There've been reports of misdeeds on the planet under Republic occupation, though. Summary executions, indiscriminate bombardment, the usual. Nothing conclusive, but Umbarans of social standing all have spy rings to put a government to shame. Maybe he really was after revenge?"

"An arm for an arm, and we'd all be cripples," Esera said, quoting her master.

"Until you went to the cybernetician," Murshida interjected.

"There's no cyberneticians where I'm from," Voyan said. "But we don't take arms for revenge, either."

"It's a metaphor, you idiots!"

For a few hours more, Esera and her dense crewmen watched the rescue operations proceed. Several Separatist formations had moved in front of the Umbarans, and engaged in a dance of maneuvers, one side attempting to block, the other attempting to get a firing solution. Eventually, the Umbarans gave up, and retreated to their own part of the system. Esera wiped the sweat from her brow as the threat of infighting receded. The rest of the Separatists were left to gather up the Republic survivors in peace, for transfer to who knew what holding facilities.

With the battle wrapped up, on the surface and in space, there was nothing more for them to do. Voyan and the droids, R8 included, got back to work on the myriad of small repairs *Encounter* still needed. Murshida retired to his pressure chamber for some time out of his suit. Esera was all alone, waiting for a chance to deal with Grievous. When she saw his shuttle's transponder leaving the planet, Esera hopped aboard *Whirlwind* and raced him to *Invisible Hand.* Somewhere, some program in the droid network knew who she was and what ship she had, and she was automatically admitted aboard. Her star courier was the faster ship, and set down first.

"What the hell, Grievous?" Esera asked, when his shuttle's ramp deployed.

Grievous gave her a tired glare.

"You can't sweep this under the rug," Esera said, arms crossed and foot tapping on the hangar deck. Grievous stalked by, not even looking back, so she followed him to the elevator. "People will be asking questions! Do you have any idea of how bad this will make us look?"

"Who cares?" asked Grievous, turning to face her.

"Your admiral just murdered thousands! If you let him get away with it, do you think anyone will ever surrender to us again?" The elevator doors opened, but Esera stepped between the huge cyborg and the cab. "Hey! You need to listen to me! This is exactly the kind of behavior I left the Republic for."

Grievous glowered down at her. "Is that a threat?"

"If you don't listen, it will be." Esera swallowed her building fear, but she knew just trying to look tough wouldn't fool Grievous. He took a step backwards, hunching down and circling around her, like a predatory bird eyeing up his next meal.

"Speak," he ordered.

"You can't let Hithlu stay in command of the fleet. We can't afford to fight every battle to the death. You should know that better than anyone else, aren't you always going on about victory or martyrdom?" Esera jabbed a finger at Grievous's metal chest. "Reward Khwaramenes, Kronaak, and whoever else accepted the Republic's surrender. Anyone who followed Hithlu, punish them. Send the message we're not just barbarian savages from the Outer Rim. If you don't care about senseless murder, okay, but you should care about the senseless waste of time and resources this could cause us in the future."

Grievous tried his best to make a snorting noise without a nose. "I will see to putting things right."

"Thank you," Esera said, trying not to sigh with relief. She hadn't been looking forward to fighting and getting killed by him. But this creature would never respect her unless she was prepared for just that.

Once again, the Jedi girl was right. Hithlu's actions could not be 'swept under the rug,' the incident was spreading through the galactic news cycle like wildfire. Grievous groaned as the leeches and parasites known as journalists on both sides of the war ran stories about the 'massacre' at Kashyyyk. Hours after the last of the Republic fleet personnel were taken prisoner, Grievous was being pestered by the Congress.

"Tell me you didn't authorize this," Corlissi Ludar, the Congressional Speaker, said. The Sluissi's hologram had one hand over his eyes. "Tell me this was some rogue taking matters into his own hands."

"Admiral Hithlu acted of his own accord," Grievous said. "The other flag officers refused to follow suit. Will that satisfy you?"

"I want to know Hithlu's fate."

For a few moments, Grievous thought. "I have officially dismissed Hithlu, but he and the forces loyal to him have departed for Umbara," he said. "They are beyond my reach."

"What?" The serpent blinked. "What do you mean, they're beyond your reach? Umbara is an occupied planet!"

"It will be difficult for the Republic to maintain its occupation without the orbital blockade in place," Grievous said.

"Even so, Umbara is a Confederate planet!"

Grievous rolled his eyes. "A politician should understand it is wise not to offend powerful allies. My authority is not infinite."

"General Grievous, admitting he's not all-powerful?" Ludar shook his head. "What is the galaxy coming to?"

"I am here to win the war, serpent. If you think you can bring the Umbarans to justice when I am done, you are welcome to try." Grievous shut off the transmission, and was instantly pestered by a hundred more requests for contact. Including yet another complaint from the Hutts, demanding Confederate forces stop violating their fake neutrality, or else. *Or else what?* Grievous wondered. *Those fat slugs wouldn't last a day against me.* He ignored all of them.

In reality, Hithlu and the Umbarans hadn't left the system. Hithlu didn't even know Umbara was ripe for liberation. That would need to change, immediately. "Admiral Hithlu," Grievous said in a new and very heavily encrypted transmission, "respond."

"General," Hithlu said, appearing on the hologram projector. "What can I do for you?"

"Your refusal to accept the Republic's surrender has angered too many people in my government and military."

"I'm aware," said Hithlu.

"I cannot pretend this did not happen, Admiral. It is politically untenable for me to keep you in my service now." Grievous felt disgusted for even saying those words, they were an implicit acknowledgment that he was not an absolute autocrat. "Captain Hatha has disabled the Republic blockade over Umbara. The rest of the fleet is busy gathering the Republic survivors and repairing damages. If you and your Umbarans were to depart for your homeworld, there would be little I could do to stop you."

The Umbaran's eyes twinkled, and he reached for a control panel beyond projection range. "I'm afraid our partnership is at an end, General."

"Unfortunate. You were one of my best officers. It seems I misjudged your professionalism and pragmatism." Grievous folded his hands together on his desk, and leaned forward. "Do you have anything to say in your defense?"

"I cannot fault you for misjudging me, General," Hithlu said. "Deception is the nature of my people, especially towards outsiders. I had a chance to repay the Loyalists with the same treatment they gave us Umbarans, I could not let that slip by. Revenge is something you ought to understand." He spread his arms, there was nothing more to say.

"Go, Admiral," said Grievous. "As long as I am in power, I will ignore you. I cannot guarantee you the same from any successor."

"I understand, General. Umbara is more than ready to face any consequences of our actions."

And that was that. Hithlu and the Umbarans departed minutes later, to return to their homeworld. *There go some of my best warriors, all to appease public opinion,* thought Grievous. If he'd still had a mouth, he would have tasted something sour. Now he'd have no choice but to put Mar Tuuk back in command of the navy again.

Later still in the day, or night, Grievous didn't particularly pay attention to what shift the ship was on, he convened his strategy council of all flag officers in the fleet. He made an announcement of what had happened with the Umbarans, and made it clear that that was the end of it. "Now, skull-face, what have we accomplished?" asked Grievous.

"Quite simply, sir," Khwaramenes said, "everything we hoped for, and more, if the Umbarans can retake their home planet. Operation Striking Star has been a resounding success. We have annihilated an entire oversector fleet and elements of three others. Republic shipyards will take months, possibly up to a year to replace what they've lost here."

"And what of us?" asked Rame Cartroll, who'd been nursing his armada back to health at Sluis Van.

"I cannot lie, we took significant losses in this battle. Ship for ship, we are even with the Republic for materiel lost," said the Givin. "However, our ships are far cheaper, easier, and quicker to replace than their Star Destroyers. Their shipyards will also be gummed up with the *Imperators* for some time. Our supply lines are virtually untouched, theirs are in shambles. And that's not to mention the loss of skilled crew and officers the Republic has suffered..."

Grievous leaned back in his chair, and basked in the glory of victory. The truest warriors won the battle before they even fought it. *Just like back on Kalee,* he thought, remembering how he'd destroyed the huk invasion force. *This time, no Jedi can stop me!*

"...it bears, repeating, officers of the fleet," Khwaramenes was saying, "that this was not the decisive battle some have spoken of. Indeed, without further action we will still likely lose, though it will be a loss long-delayed. My calculations indicate that we must take full advantage of the next three months of relative freedom we will have, if we are to win this war."

"Of course," Grievous said, as if he'd been listening the whole time. "I will begin planning the next campaign. Securing faster navigation routes is our highest priority, as is crippling the Republic's ability to fight by whatever means necessary." Indeed, the longer the Republic struggled to supply its vast, far-flung armies and fleets stretched across the Outer Rim, the longer the Confederacy would have time to deal with those armies and fleets. "But I have another task for all of you." The officers all leaned forward, some curious, some nervous at just what the infamous Grievous might ask of them next. "I have read all your reports on the new Star Destroyer, and I will not dismiss them as Dooku did. You have all fought on the front lines, and lived to tell, so far. You know what our weaknesses and strengths are, and the enemy's."

Young Eemon sat up straight, and raised his hand. "General, are you requesting consultation for a new ship design?" he asked, eyes alight.

Grievous tried not to snort. "Yes, I am," he said. "I require only that it can be built twice as fast as the Republic's newest cruiser. I expect ideas and suggestions from all of you. That is all."

Kashyyyk was no ordinary defeat. It was a catastrophe.

Those were the words Tarkin had said to the HNN reporters that morning, when news of the Therbon's surrender had hit the holonet. The bloodthirsty barbarians from the Outer Rim had played right into his hands, by attempting to massacre the defenseless fleet. *It's too perfect,* he thought, offering up a toast to Grievous across the light-years. *You've given me everything I needed, you savage brute.*

The whole 12th Fleet was gone. Substantial elements of other oversector fleets were gone. Tens of thousands of officers and clone troopers were captured. The Separatist's strongest bastion was now out of reach of the Republic indefinitely. Armies and fleets in enemy territory were withdrawing to consolidate the remaining supply lines. The war had been prolonged by a matter of years.

But peace was off the table for good now, after what the Umbaran had done. The people of the Republic cried out for vengeance and justice, they called for blood. And Tarkin would give it to them. That was why, in today's emergency session of the Senate, Tarkin followed in the footsteps of his sometimes-foolish mentor, Sheev Palpatine.

"...and as a result of Chancellor Amedda's incompetence and ineptitude, thousands of our brave men and women are dead, and tens of thousands shall languish in Separatist dungeons and torture chambers! This administration cannot continue! Therefore, I call for a vote of no confidence in Supreme Chancellor Mas Amedda!"

The Senate chamber erupted in response. The division in the Republic had never been clearer: the aliens booed, the Humans chanted 'vote now!' And the Humans had it.

Everything that has transpired here has done so according to my design, thought Tarkin, with a thin smile. *Hmm, I'm even starting to think like Sheev...*

Silence reigned in the Jedi High Council chambers. Shaak Ti was the first to break it. "So, it was a trap."

"A trap we walked right into," said Mace Windu, who was staring at the floor in front of him.

"You sensed it, Shaak Ti. And so did Yoda," Obi-wan said. Yoda had gotten off Kashyyyk, but so far had yet to make contact. His whereabouts remained unknown. "How did this happen?"

"The left hand is not talking to the right. I don't believe that there's no one in the Republic who didn't know how bad our supply issues were. Perhaps we were set up. Perhaps the Sith Lord we've been looking for is showing his influence once more," mused Plo Koon.

"Two Jedi dead, an entire fleet lost, tens of thousands of casualties- there's going to be questions," said Ki-Adi Mundi. "While we were not responsible for the fiasco above the planet, Master Yoda was in charge of the over-all ground defense. Which failed spectacularly against Grievous."

"Master Yoda's not the first Jedi to lose a battle," Obi-wan said.

"But his involvement in Kashyyyk was very high profile. The media will be all over it," Ki-Adi said.

"The media is not our concern. What concerns me is Senator Tarkin's call for a vote of no confidence, it reminds me too much of Palpatine's rise-" began Mace Windu, but he was interrupted by an incoming call from Republic Intelligence. A clone officer saluted the Council.

"Generals, we have just picked up a transmission from General Yoda, origin unknown. Requesting permission to patch it through."

"At once," Windu said, sitting up and looking attentive. The sharp hologram of the clone vanished, replaced by a fuzzy, static-filled hologram of Master Yoda.

"Master Yoda!" Shaak Ti exclaimed, visibly brightening.

"Alive, am I, worry not," said Yoda, leaning on his cane. "With the Wookiees, I am, say no more can I. Learned disturbing information, I have. A priority to get it to you, it has been."

"We heard you'd engaged Grievous," said Plo Koon.

"Yes, yes, true that is." Yoda nodded, but Obi-wan got the sense the subject of his duel with the crazed cyborg was something trite to Yoda. "A conversation I had with Grievous, as well."

Mace Windu raised an eyebrow, and the other masters looked at each other in surprise. "A conversation?" echoed Shaak Ti, curiosity immediately replacing her joy at seeing the Grand Master alive. Yoda recounted how he'd ambushed Grievous, and forced him to tell Yoda what he knew about the Sith in exchange for a proper duel.

"A great many things, learnt I," said Yoda. "The Sith Lord, Sidious; believes him dead, Grievous does. Claims, he does, to not have heard from Sidious in months. Since the battle above Coruscant." The old Jedi stared into nothing, contemplatively, and none dared disrupt his thoughts. "Felt a dark energy in the Force, I have, since that day," Yoda finally said.

"We all have," said Ki-Adi.

"Do you think Grievous is telling the truth?" asked Obi-wan. "If this Sith Lord really was killed in the battle, it might explain the turmoil clouding everything more than ever." It would also mean the Sith were truly extinct, with only Maul and Asajj Ventress left as relics of their legacy... Those were implications to dwell on later, though.

"Yes," Yoda said. "Spoke the truth, he did. Felt it, did I. Anger and hate there was in him, but no lie."

"I sense this wasn't all he told you," said Shaak Ti.

"More, yes, more," agreed Yoda. "About his home world, the Jedi, and the lost child Komara."

Obi-wan's eyes narrowed as he picked up on the look on Yoda's face. "You met her, didn't you, Master?"

"There she was." The expression on Yoda's face was one part sadness, one part confusion. "Raised more questions than answers, our meeting did."

"Is she truly a dark Jedi?" asked Plo Koon.

"No," said Yoda. "Speak of this more on my return, we will. Assignments, I have. Shaak Ti, investigate the recent history of Kalee you will, and the war with the Yam'rii. Go to Kalee, if you must. Match our records, Grievous's claims do not. Might we understand our enemy better, yes? And Obi-wan," Yoda turned to him, "still healing, are you?"

"The healers have asked me to stay in recuperation for another week. I fear I'm not as young as I used to be..." Obi-wan smiled apologetically.

"Look into the life of young Komara, you will. What drove her away from the Order, we must discover." Yoda tapped his cane on the floor of wherever he was. "In danger, many more young Jedi are, I fear."

"Yes, Master," said Obi-wan. "On the subject of Komara and Sidious, I made an interesting discovery of my own. Maul's ship was being held in Theed by a company being funded by a certain Janus Greejatus. I suggest we look into this man's affairs, he could be a link to the Sith Lord, living or not."

"It's all about the Umbarans," Voyan sighed, glumly staring at the holotank he and Murshida had installed in *Encounter*'s meager mess hall. "Every shadowfeed, Umbara this, massacre that!"

"I take it this behavior is unusual in galactic warfare?" asked Murshida.

"I wish," Esera said. "Everyone likes to think they're above that, but apparently not."

The three organics, plus R8, lapsed into silence as the chief news anchors of Raxus Today talked on. Nal Verik, a Muun man, and Sarina Crena, a Raxian Human woman, were discussing the possible backlash against Grievous that might result from the incident.

"General Grievous has proven remarkably disinterested in civil affairs since he succeeded the late Count," Verik said, ever a dry and supposedly unbiased commentator. "Some might say this disinterest is merely a warrior's disdain for administration, but there are some in the opposition who claim Grievous is disinterested *because* he thinks the civilian government is powerless. What do you think, Sarina?"

"I'm not so sure Congress is as powerless as some claim. Look at the facts, Nal," said Crena, her typically Raxian overdone eyeshadow no longer so foreign to Esera. "Grievous has been in power for months now, and he has followed every rule the civilian government has set. He even preemptively relived Admiral Hithlu of command, before Congress even knew what had happened."

You're welcome, Esera thought. How had she become the moral compass for an interstellar government's leader? Let alone Grievous, of all creatures... That idea was still baffling, after all this time.

"There have been reports of a secret police being established, though..." Verik said, opening his hand as a gesture for further comment.

"Yes, we have heard about this Office of Safety and Information suddenly being added to the budget, as well as a department named Naval Intelligence," said Crena. *That's me, again!* Esera thought, as Murshida and Voyan glanced at her. "However, there's no concrete evidence either of these organizations is engaged in extralegal behavior."

"That is reassuring," Verik said, nodding to himself. "My apologies to our viewers for that tangent. Let's get back to our coverage of the war. The Confederate military announced total victory in the Mytaranor Sector earlier today, ending a several weeks-long battle that until yesterday looked like it could have gone either way. The military has made no press releases explaining the rapid and unforeseen collapse of Republic forces in the region, but skeptics only have to tune in to our counterparts on the Holonet to see that whatever happened there, it's very real."

Crena took over, after glancing at her datapad. "Not long after Governor Therbon's surrender, Republic fleets began withdrawing in several key areas of Confederate territory. One such area was the Sluis Sector, where we now turn to our regional correspondent, Seka Yuva."

The holotank switched from the two well-dressed anchors in their posh Raxulon studio to a Sluissi girl who was managing to be both dust-covered and mud-caked at the same time. "I'm here on Orto, where civil war has ravaged the planet. Until a few hours ago, battles raged across the primary continent, but the clone legion deployed here has left the front lines and is packing up its heavy equipment, leaving everything in the hands of Loyalist rebels. Government forces, backed by the Confederate droid army, began a new offensive immediately, overwhelming rebel lines in many places." The feed switched to muted footage of a large, girthy Ortolan, richly-garbed, speaking in what must have been a government chamber. Seka Yuva returned soon after. "President Belo Tusus gave a speech this evening, declaring this was the 'beginning of the end' for the rebels and their Jedi leader, Nem Bees, an Ortolan himself."

Again, Esera's two organic crewmen glanced at her, at the mention of *Jedi*. "Hey, both sides do this kind of thing, okay?" she told them, giving them a glare.

"What kind of thing?" asked Voyan, narrowing his eyes.

"You know, the 'prop up an oppressive regime that favors you' thing," Esera said. "No one's innocent of that in this war."

"Who said Tusus was oppressing his people?" Voyan asked.

"Oh, come on, the guy's stolen billions of credits from his own people! His only saving grace is that he's too greedy to kill his own tax base for opposing him. Surely Raxus Today isn't the only place you get your news from, right?" The engineer-mechanic-cook looked somewhere else, while Murshida stared blankly from behind his goggles. "Oh no..." sighed Esera.

"Alright, wise seventeen year old, tell us where you get your unbiased news," said Voyan, forgetting his place for a moment. His eyes widened as he continued to look at the wall. "I mean, uh, wise seventeen year old captain."

Esera would have felt silly saying she got most of her news from a discussion forum on a shadowfeed, so she just lifted a cup with the Force and bounced it off the man's head. "Watch it, Voyan," she said.

"I am watching it, Captain," Voyan said, looking around for any more floating cups attacking him.

The broadcast continued, as the young Sluissi reporter downplayed the Tusus regime's corruption and played up the Loyalist rebel's damage to the planet's infrastructure. Seka Yuva wasn't a new face to Esera, she'd seen her first report in a Terminus cantina, all those long months ago after leaving the Republic. Esera hoped the girl was just following instructions from the studio on Raxus, and didn't actually believe what she was saying. *Everyone's guilty of something in this war,* she thought. *Even me. I let Grievous do that secret tribunal, it was even my idea. For the greater good, right?* But who decided what the greater good was? When could the ends truly justify the means? At what point could she draw the line? Esera retreated into reflection, until she was summoned to the official debriefing aboard *Invisible Hand.*

The Separatists were consolidating their new holdings, all the way out to Umbara. Captain Hatha and *Cataclysm,* the notorious raiding battleship, had completed their first patrol and were returning for refit and recuperation, as well as unloading their war prizes. Esera watched the great silver battleship pull up alongside the fueling station above Bimmisaari, easily matching it in size. Many of the fleet officers were gathering here for the official debriefing on Grievous's ship, as well as a private celebration hosted by none other than Ricimer Eemon aboard his flagship, *Morning Star*. As the head of Naval Intelligence, Esera's presence had been requested at both, even if her department was three people and a droid on an old destroyer.

A Givin named Khwaramenes gave the debriefing, a holographic slide show of charts, figures, after action analysis, and more graphs than Esera's head had room for. She got the picture: the Confederacy had won a huge victory, the Republic had suffered a massive setback, but the war was far from won. In fact, they'd only saved themselves from certain defeat. But this battle was still an accomplishment worthy of history. Grievous's strategy of supply interdiction, encirclement, and annihilation was a classical Kaleesh strategem that was now proven to work just as well in space as it did on Kalee. Now the Confederacy had gained several months of breathing room. The only question was where did they go from here?

And that wasn't something Esera decided. Word was going around that Grievous wanted ideas for a new cruiser class to deal with the *Imperator*s that had caused so much trouble over the last few weeks. Esera knew about as much about astronautical architecture as she knew about grand strategy in galactic war, though.

"I don't think I want to go to this... social event," Esera told Voyan, when she was back aboard *Encounter*.

"Then don't, Captain," Voyan said. "Tell them you're very busy with Naval Intelligence affairs."

"But I'm not!"

"Captain, what kind of intelligence officer can't lie?" asked the engineer-mechanic-cook. Esera gave him her best Jedi master look of disapproval.

In the end, Esera did end up going to the dreaded social event. Lacking a uniform, she just wore one of her more formal Raxian dresses, and ended up looking completely out of place. She knew a total of three people present: the Givin who gave the debriefing, Kronaak from Grievous's secret tribunal, and Ricimer Eemon, the host, who she'd also seen at the tribunal. *In nothing but a towel,* thought Esera, her face going hot the moment she saw him. Eemon was a smooth operator, gliding from cluster to cluster of officers, greeting them like old friends. Eventually, he noticed Esera, standing by herself and taking advantage of the free food.

"Why, hello," said Eemon, sliding up to her gracefully, "I don't believe I've had the pleasure of meeting you before." Esera was caught with her mouth full of some kind of sliced-up little green gourd-looking vegetable. She stood still for a moment, not sure of what to say. "Enjoying Carammite produce, I see?"

Esera nodded, and finished chewing. "It's free," she said.

"Spoken like a true soldier!" said Eemon, smiling brightly. "I'm sure you know I'm Ricimer Eemon, Rear Admiral."

"I'm Esera. Uh, I mean, I'm Esera Komara. A captain. Naval Intelligence. I'm a captain in Naval Intelligence. *The* captain, actually." Already, she felt sweat on her brow as her cheeks flushed. "It's a new department."

"Ah, yes," Eemon said with a nod. "I saw that in the announcements. You're quite young for an officer... but so am I, I don't judge."

"Yeah."

"I must wonder, Captain Komara- can I call you Esera? You can call me Ricimer."

"Yeah."

"I must wonder, Esera, how you came to be the head of an entire department. My story is quite simple, my father is a vital supplier of war materiel to the Confederacy, they had no choice but to give me my own ship. Is there an old man Komara out there, pulling strings? Maybe an old woman Komara? Or are you really just that good at what you do?" Eemon's smile was utterly dazzling, Esera could barely keep her mind on track.

"Um, no, actually," said Esera. "I... uh... I've done some useful favors for Grievous, I guess, and, uh, this just fell into my lap when I asked to be on the payroll."

"On a first name basis with the good General, I see! Very impressive, Esera, very impressive."

"Yeah."

Some other officers had noticed Eemon talking to her, and they moved in to listen, making Esera feel even more on-the-spot. "Everyone, meet Captain Esera Komara, she's our new head of our new division, Naval Intelligence. Yes, that's right, *she's* the Captain Komara the General mentioned! So young, I know..."

Esera tuned them all out for the moment, trying to figure out what to do and what to say. Her heartbeat was up, she was having to remember to breath, she couldn't think straight at all. *What is this?* Esera wondered. Was a dashing young man supposed to have this kind of effect on a young woman?

"What do you think, Captain?" asked one of the officers.

"Huh? I'm sorry, my mind was, um, somewhere else."

"Admiral Hithlu's actions during the Republic surrender. Was he justified?"

"No!" said Esera, in a voice that was a little too loud. She glanced around, blushing even more. "I mean, no, it wasn't, at all. Yeah, the invasion of Umbara was brutal, trust me, I know, I was there." That got some exchanged glances of surprise from the little crowd. Yes, Esera had been on Umbara, a continent away from the Krell incident. In fact, she was sure she hadn't arrived until after Krell had been executed. "But two wrongs don't make a right, you know? Murdering thousands because you're mad isn't justice. It can never be justice."

"Well said," Eemon agreed, raising his glass of wine–or was it something else?–to her. "In fact, I didn't put it any better myself! I told everyone we couldn't follow those orders. There was nothing right or just about them at all."

Esera could sense in the force a small degree of deception from him. She remembered how quick he'd been to accept Grievous's secret posthumous tribunal of the traitors. *I think you weren't so eager to disobey as you want to seem,* thought Esera. As handsome as he was, Esera wasn't going to let that blind her to just what kind of man he might really be. *Beauty does not equate to goodness,* she reminded herself. She'd keep an eye on Eemon in the future, and not just for admiration's sake.

Eventually, Eemon and his entourage moved on, leaving Esera to her little green gourd slices. She was thankful no one else bothered her for the rest of the event. Esera took back as much of the free food as she wanted to her ship. Maybe Voyan could learn something from Carammite cuisine.

Once safe aboard *Encounter,* with the Carammite vegetables, fruits, and pastries delivered into a confused Voyan's hands, Esera reviewed the latest fleet news. All reconnaissance indicated the Republic was pulling back on multiple fronts, Grievous was reshuffling the combined fleet units back to their proper regions. *Encounter* didn't have any assignment. Esera sent off a query to Grievous about what she should do next.

My technicians will look over the cloaking device on Maul's ship. Continue your investigation into Sidious and Dooku. Then take leave time, was his answer.

"Huh." Esera sat back in the captain's chair, reading the message again. *I already had leave time,* she sent to him.

You have two weeks starting in three days.

"Okay, then." She opened a comm line to Voyan and Murshida. "Hey boys, we've got two weeks of leave coming up."

"But I just got here," Murshida said, his softer natural voice distorted by the atmosphere of his pressure chamber. "What am I supposed to do?"

"You can help me fix up the ship," Voyan said. "Two weeks in the Raxus system is all I need, captain. I'll take it."

"Uh, lieutenant, you're supposed to take time off during leave..."

"And do what, Captain?" asked Voyan. "My speeder is in long-term storage in a Minntooine space station, and Raxus traffic laws are very strict."

What? Esera sighed. "Have it your way, Voyan. Work on the ship if you want to."

"What about you, Captain?"

"I really don't know, lieutenant." But an idea was forming in her mind, and she wasn't sure she liked it.

Author's note: Ya salaam, it's been like two months since my last update that I thought I'd have out in two weeks! But hey, don't blame me entirely, I got caught up in preparing for a semester abroad, and then the task of surviving my first month 7000 miles/11,200 kilometers from the only place I've ever known. The next chapter will not be out for some time because time is what I don't really have right now, except on Fridays and Saturdays.

I hope this chapter is a somewhat satisfying conclusion to this arc, I really struggled with getting it done while working on it piecemeal intermittently for like eight weeks. So to hell with it, here you guys go, enjoy Esera discovering cucumber slices, and thanks for being so patient. Except the anonymous guy who keeps asking me to update soon. Send me 1980s Egyptian synthpop cassette tapes and we'll talk about a more regular update schedule, okay?

< Prev | 29. Chapter 29: Striking Star V | Next >

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